A Publication of the Consultative Group on Biological Diversity

BIODIVERSITY

Spring 1999

Volume 9, Number 2

Funder Group Addresses Problems with GMOs

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What is all the fuss about genetically modified organisms (GMOs)? Isn't this the technology of the future that promises to feed the hungry and cure disease? As one concerned citizen and funder, I would reply, "well, maybe." But, why the equivocal response?

Genetically modified crops

Genetically modified crops have been engineered to contain traits from unrelated organisms. These are traits or genes that could never be combined or developed by past methods of grafting or cross breeding. Acreage in transgenic crops has been expanding rapidly, doubling in the United States in one year to 51 million acres. It is ironic that in a period when there is considerable concern and attention paid to the loss of biological diversity that industry is creating new organisms that could, without proper safeguards, further compromise the earth's biodiversity.

While some funders feel that biotechnology could hold enormous promise for mankind, others are concerned that we not rush headlong into adopting this new, and in many ways unproven, technology without first considering the ecological, health and even ethical consequences. Some funders feel that there are too few voices urging a cautious approach to the adoption of this new technology and that the regulatory and approval processes, which were established for the technology of an earlier era, may be inadequate to deal with the new bio-engineered products of tomorrow.

Development of GMOs

Agricultural biotechnology is moving extraordinarily fast, promoted in large part by huge multi-national corporations that stand to reap enormous profits from the control of this technology. Mergers and acquisitions, including the recently announced Dupont acquisition of Pioneer HiBred International, concentrate most of this technology in three multi-national corporations: Novartis AG, Monsanto and Dupont.

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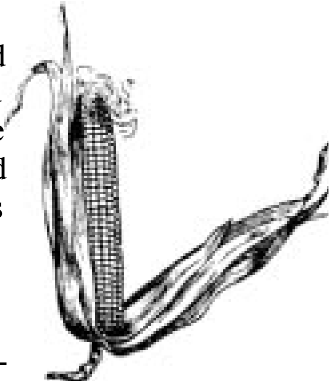
Approximately two dozen genetically modified crops have been approved for commercial use. Many are now available in the marketplace. Many hundreds of products are being field tested, including such crops as corn, canola, cotton, soybeans, potatoes, tomatoes and squash. Laboratory testing is also taking place on transgenic fish. Ignoring the risks related to this new technology could be analogous to what we have subsequently learned about the environmental and health risks associated with some chemical uses and nuclear energy.

Environmental Risks

Assessing ecological risks is complex because so much is unknown about the inter-relationships of plants, animals and insects and the consequences of changing those relationships. Ecological risks include the possibility of a genetically modified plant becoming a biological pollutant or negatively effecting animal life dependent on a particular plant, thereby altering delicate ecological relationships. Other risks involve the possibility of bioengineered fish escaping rearing facilities and threatening native fish and aquatic ecosystems. Some traits which are being engineered into plants are designed to give them an advantage to survive in normally inhospitable environments. What might be the ecological impact on a previously uninhabited environment by such species? Unintended consequences are difficult to predict without extensive research and testing.

Health Risks



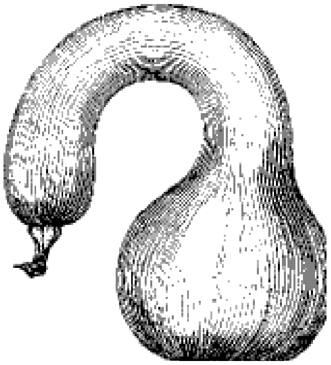
Genetically modified organisms consumed as food may increase certain health-related risks, including risks due to specific allergens. In one case persons allergic to Brazil nuts experienced an allergic reaction to a new soybean into which a Brazil nut gene had been added. Currently, the regulatory processes do not require labeling of most food products that are genetically engineered.

This clearly is a huge issue for those who have allergies and for those whose religious beliefs or dietary constraints restrict consumption of certain foods. Many organic food customers have concerns about including genetically modified foods in their diets. The organic food industry is working to keep genetically modified foods from carrying the organic label.

Solutions

The best way to assess the risks of genetically modified products or crops is through careful research and a regulatory process that demands proof that the modified products pose minimal risks. Food labeling could provide consumers important information and choice. Currently, there is no such comprehensive regulatory process or food labeling requirement in the U.S. or in most other countries. In the U.S., biotechnology is covered by a patchwork of existing statutes that were not designed to deal with genetically modified crop issues. It is also important that consumer interests be represented in international institutions and arenas, including the World Bank, the CODEX (described as an international Food and Drug Administration) and the Convention on Biological Diversity. The treaties and protocols developed by these international bodies largely will determine how genetically modified food is traded in world markets.

Funder Response

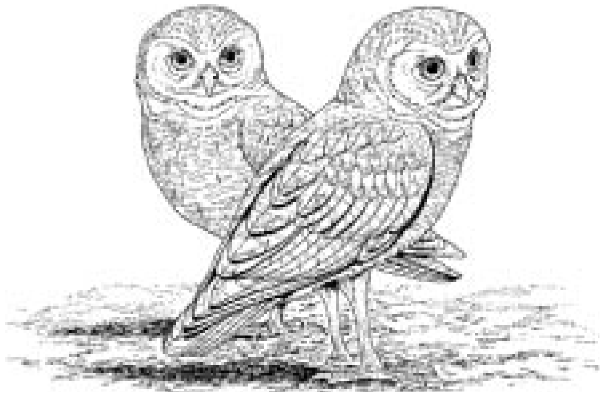


The issues around genetically modified crops and food have only recently begun to generate foundation interest and public attention. There is a real opportunity for funders to have an impact by increasing the resources available to the relatively small, nonprofit constituency advocating for effective national and international consumer information, regulatory and safety standards. Funders can also play a catalytic role to broaden the awareness of these issues among the foundation world and general public, something that has been sorely lacking.

Concerned funders have created the Biotechnology Working Group to explore issues of common concern. We hope to expand this dialogue and share these concerns through three regional funder briefings to be held in late spring and early summer. The first briefing will be in San Francisco on June 18; the second will be in New York on June 29. A third, yet to be scheduled, will be in the Midwest. The briefings will focus primarily on agricultural uses of biotechnology and the potential environmental consequences of genetically modified crops and organisms rather than the use of biotechnology in medicine.

The potential exists to create a broad-based movement or campaign that could influence how this new and powerful technology is applied and regulated, and whether it will be used to benefit all mankind. If you are interested in attending the Biotechnology Working Group briefings to learn more about the issues or participating in monthly, please call Chris Desser at (415) 561-2627 or <chris@igc.org>.

CGBD WORKING GROUP UPDATES



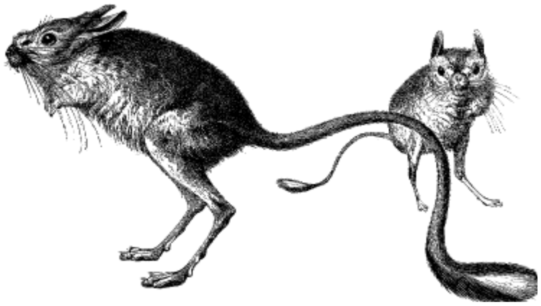
Forests

The Private Forest sub-group has launched its consultancy on "facilitating funder collaboration on U.S. private forest conservation". The Pacific Forest Trust will be the lead consultant on the project, with assistance from Mater Engineering and the Samson Group. The final report will summarize the state of U.S. privately-owned forests, identify threats to their continued existence and conservation, and discuss available tools to encourage conservation, and propose a grantmaking program to conserve privately-owned forest lands.

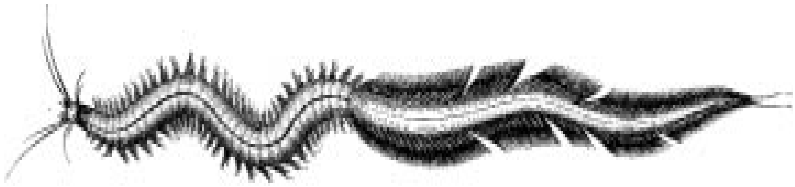
The Public Forest sub-group is hosting a funder briefing, "Forests and the Trees: Key Opportunities for Protection of Public Forest Lands", on May 20-21 in San Francisco. The briefing will begin with an overview of federal forest policy from the perspective of the public, the Administration, Congress and the environmental community. Funders will be updated on several emerging issues, including: industrial recreation on public forest lands, World Trade Organization developments, and the links between watershed management and forests. The majority of the briefing is designed for funders to discuss their current efforts on public forest issues and to design strategies for collaboration on key issues.

The Sustainable Forestry/Certification sub-group will meet at Squam Lake, New Hampshire on July 12-14. Although the agenda has yet to be determined, the focus will remain on developing both the supply and demand for products derived from sustainably-managed forests worldwide.

Biodiversity & Environmental Health



The Biodiversity and Environmental Health Working Group convened an environmental health session at the Grantmakers in Health Annual Meeting in Tempe, Arizona. They are forging ahead with plans to sponsor similar sessions with other funder affinity groups, widening the circle of philanthropic interests and opportunities in environmental health: healthy ecosystems, threats to biodiversity, healthy communities, threats to human health. Members continue to support a wide range of environmental health projects — from Pew's new Environmental Health Commission, to briefings on the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention's environmental health laboratory, to grassroots work with healthcare workers and cancer activists, to science on frog disappearances. The new influx of philanthropy from conversion foundations also still captures the attention of this group.



Marine

Following up on their funder briefing last December, the Marine Working Group continues to gather information on marine protected areas (MPAs), with an eye to collaborating on local and regional MPA projects, as well as state and national MPA policy development. The group is following closely the development of a three-region assessment, conducted by the Pew Charitable Trusts, of opportunities to advance marine protected areas.

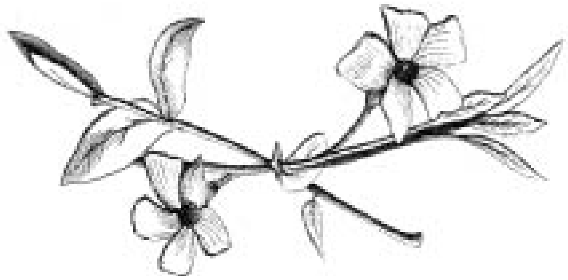
Interest in reform of the U.S. fishing regulatory regime remains high, as funders continue to support the work of the Marine Fish Conservation Network (MFCN) and several regionally-based advocacy groups. MFCN is a coalition of commercial, environmental and recreational organizations addressing reform of the U.S. domestic fishery management system. MFCN will have a lead role in promoting the reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Fisheries Conservation Act and will assist the regional advocacy organizations as they promote reform before the regional fishery management councils.

Finally, the working group is showing an increased interest in the issue of shrimp aquaculture. Several members support organizations fighting the conversion of mangrove swamps to shrimp aquaculture farms. Members are also concerned about the potential introduction of viral pathogens into the U.S. through importation of farm-raised shrimp.

THE BIODIVERSITY PROJECT

In early February, the CGBD's Biodiversity Project staff traveled to Tucson to participate in the Wildlands Project's implementation workshop for its Sky Islands project. This was an opportunity to provide input on research, audiences and approaches to public outreach, as a group develops overall strategy on a major initiative.

The Spirituality Working Group met in a productive retreat in early March. A diverse group (from evangelical Christian to Buddhist to Goddess and much in between) agreed that we live in a diverse spiritual culture and a single message may not serve our purposes, yet there are unifying spiritual values that bring many to environmental work. The group drafted an initial, overarching message, and will work with various partners to refine it over the coming months. The group will also draft a guide for outreach to people of faith and spirit, targeted primarily at environmental groups.



Both the Toolshed and Training Initiatives move forward and will enter the proposal phase this month. The Toolshed's first acquisitions of media images, lists and research will most likely be linked to land-use and wild habitat, which should be available to co-op members by this fall. Check the website, www.mediatools.org. The Training Collaborative partner organizations have developed a suite of initiatives in four areas: core communications skills; communications capacity for sprawl issues; leadership and communications for groups working on biodiversity issues in the Southeast; developing the training programs for these initiatives.

On April 9, the Project's Strategy Team voted to follow the recommendations of the CGBD Board and spin the Biodiversity Project off as an independent 501(c)(3) organization. The goal is to be up and running in that new capacity by January 1, 2000.

MEMBER NEWS

Camilla Seth has joined the environment program at the Surdna Foundation in New York, as Associate Program Officer. Before coming to Surdna, Camilla was a Senior Associate at EA Capital, a consulting and financial services firm focused on the sustainability sectors in the energy and forestry industries.

The Packard Foundation has two new additions to its Conservation Program Staff. **Michael Sutton**, Program Officer for Sustainable Fisheries, will be responsible for grantmaking related to the conservation of marine fisheries. **Scott Rehmus**, Associate Program Officer, will research and develop Packard's efforts to engage more scientists in environmental policy.

The Pew Charitable Trusts welcomes two new program officers: **Jay Nelson** and **Kathleen Welch**. Jay will be working on marine and forest conservation issues and Kathleen on climate change issues.

After three years as Program Officer at the Flintridge Foundation, **Brad Smith** is leaving to pursue new endeavors. Following extensive travel, Brad hopes to continue his environmental work with a non-profit organization in the West.

The **Funders' Network on Smart Growth and Livable Communities** has been launched to serve as a new resource and focal point for foundations that are working to address the range of environmental, social, and economic problems that are exacerbated by the phenomenon of suburban sprawl and urban disinvestment. Inquiries about the Funders' Network on Smart Growth and Livable Communities can be made to Ben Starrett at (305) 377-4484.

UPCOMING EVENTS

May 16-19. National Watershed Conference: Getting the Job Done at the Ground Level. (Austin, TX). Contact: John Peterson, (703) 455-6886 or <jwpeterson@erols.com>.

June 14-16. CGBD Annual Members Meeting (Santa Fe, NM). Contact Alicia Ushijima, (415) 561-6575 or <cgbd@cgbd.org>.

Aug. 15-20. Managing for Ecosystem Health - An International Congress on Ecosystem Health (Sacramento, CA). Contact: Congress Secretariat, <ehc@ucdavis.edu>

Aug. 20-Sept. 2. American Fisheries Society Annual Meeting (Charlotte, NC). Contact Betsy Fritz, (301) 897-8616 or <bfritz@fisheries.org>

Sept. 7-11. The Wildlife Society Annual Conference: Excellence in Wildlife Stewardship Through Conservation and Education (Austin, TX). Contact: The Wildlife Society, (301) 897-9770 or <tws@wildlife.org>

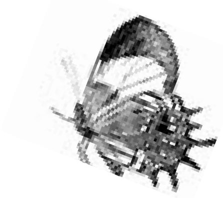
HOT SPOTS ON THE WEB...

This edition of "Biodiversity Hot Spots on the Web" focuses on the topic of biotechnology and genetically modified organisms. It is a "hot" topic and one worth exploring.

<http://www.essential.org/crg> The Council for Responsible Genetics (CRG) website promotes a comprehensive public interest agenda for biotechnology. CRG educates the public about the social and environmental implications of new genetic technologies and the socially responsible use of these new technologies.

<http://www.zero.com.au/agen/html/food/html> The Gene Ethics Network website has a wide spectrum of information regarding genetically engineered food. Everything from allergies to the possible outcomes of interfering with evolutionary processes is covered.

<http://www.safe-food.org> The Mothers for Natural Law website is also a great place to visit if you would like information on genetically engineered food. The site gives a list of the genetically engineered crops approved for sale and also gives tips on how to avoid buying food with engineered ingredients.



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